NEWS

Research highlights parents' relaxed attitude to sun safety

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New research, released today by the Met Office in conjunction with the NHS England #CoverUpMate skin cancer campaign, has revealed a worryingly relaxed attitude towards sun care amongst many parents of young children.

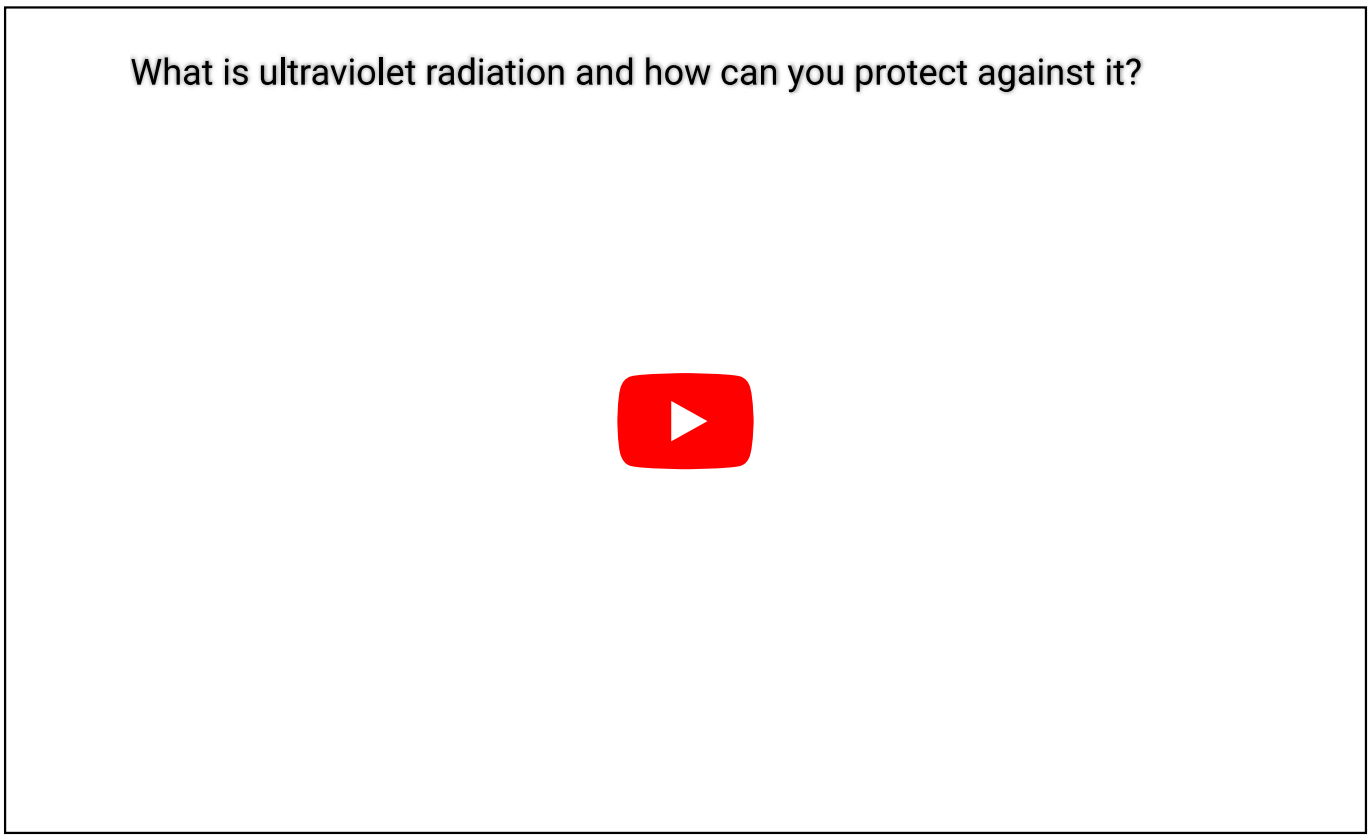
Sunburn in childhood has been strongly linked to the development of skin cancer in later years, making it a vital time for parents to ensure their children are protected.

The study – conducted amongst 1,000 parents with children aged 11 and under – revealed that one in 14 parents (7%) admit they have NEVER applied sunscreen to their children. Despite suntans being a sign of the skin being damaged by UV rays (understood by 47% of respondents) over a third (37%) incorrectly believe that suntans are a sign of good health.

Incredibly, a quarter (25%) of parents with children aged 11 and under have encouraged them to get a tan one way or another, with one in ten parents (10%) of children aged 2-7 admitting they have encouraged them to sunbathe. Even more worryingly, 7% of parents with children aged 6-11 have allowed their children to use a UV sun tanning machine (sunbed). Furthermore, 10% of parents with children aged 11 and under admit they have told their children to take their top off in the sunshine so they don't get tan lines.

Whilst shocking, the figures can in some ways be explained by a lack of knowledge amongst parents of the damage the sun can inflict. For example:

- 7% do not know that UV rays make you burn and have strong links to cancer
- 15% do not know you can still be exposed to UV rays on cool or cloudy days
- 46% incorrectly think you can feel UV rays when the sun is strong (you cannot feel UV rays)
- 21% do not realise you are at most risk from UV rays between May and September



When asked about how and when they take precautions against the sun with their young children, more than one in five (21%) parents with children aged 11 and under said they wait until their child starts to visibly burn (turn pink) before they would decide to apply any sunscreen. A similar number (20%) said they wait until their child requests it. In addition, by the time their child has reached eight years old, 23% of parents expect them to apply sunscreen themselves.

Many parents are also unlikely to know which days they need to give their children extra protection, considering just 19% check the UV forecast each day. Indeed, 40% of respondents said they have never checked the UV

forecast. UV levels are not necessarily dependent on the temperature or whether it's sunny, meaning cooler or cloudy days do not automatically mean lower UV levels.

As well as the longer-term risks of sun exposure in childhood, many parents will experience more immediate negative effects. Seventeen per cent of children 11 and under have experienced 'painful' sunburn four or more times in the past two years, whilst 40% have experienced sunburn to some extent in that time. Four per cent of parents say their child has been sunburned so severely, they had to be admitted to hospital, whilst six per cent say that sunburn has ruined a family holiday.

Clare Nasir, Met Office presenter and meteorologist, said**:** "As a sun-savvy mum, the findings are really worrying. Young children can't be expected to apply their own sunscreen – they are unlikely to do it thoroughly, or forgo it completely. Protecting against skin cancer isn't something parents should leave to chance.

"UV levels are usually highest between May and September. Clouds don't always stop UV rays, and unlike the sun's warmth, it's difficult to know when they may be harming you. You can protect yourself and your family by checking the UV forecast on the Met Office app."

Nigel Acheson, NHS England South Region Medical Director, said: "It's important that parents take extra care to protect their babies and children. Their skin is much more sensitive than adult skin, and damage caused by repeated exposure to UV could lead to skin cancer developing in later life. If the Met Office UV forecast is moderate or high, children aged under six months should spend time in the shade and out of direct sunlight – particularly from 11am to 3pm. We should all remember to cover up with suitable clothing and wear sunscreen with a good UV-A protection. If you're unsure please visit the NHS Choices website for the latest sun safety advice."

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